The First Metamorphosis

By Elodie Christian

Edited by Ostara Gale & Aristide Twain

PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

Copyright © Elodie Christian 2024

All rights reserved.

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to other narratives or stories is done entirely within the bounds of parody and/or satire. Beyond the targets thereof, any resemblance to persons living or dead, or events past or present, is co-incidental.

The right of Elodie Christian to be identified as the author of this work is asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Lotto © Elodie Christian

1. The Interview

"I remember… fire," the patient said, holding his wrist tightly.

It had finally healed fully, which was a relief, but still the *memory* of the hurt ached whenever he moved.

The patient took a long, deep breath as he tried to collect his thoughts. "There was a lot of fire," he said, "because I crashed… something"

His face seemed to cloud in confusion when resting on this point, as if dwelling on it drew him away from the present.

"I climbed out, passed out, and woke out here — er, up here." There wasn't much there, the patient admitted to himself, but it was all he could muster from his memory, and he offered it up to his interrogator.

The interrogator, an old woman named Patch, was unimpressed.

In the three months that the patient — who called himself "Lotto" — had been at the Happiness Facility, he couldn't remember a single time he'd seen the woman smile. The pair both looked to be the same age — around their 50s — although Patch looked much less like a *real* person.

Her namesake, a black eye-patch, covered part of a scar over the right side of her face, which was further concealed from sight by a single lock of white hair that sprouted from a sea of auburn. She wore the company outfit — white button shirt and black trousers with a vibrant orange tie. Lotto thought it hurt to look at and, although she'd never admit it, Patch agreed.

"Your story's changed," she told him.

"Has it?" Lotto asked. In truth, he couldn't remember what he'd explained last time.

"Last time you said you crashed a spaceship."

"And when I said that, you called me an idiot."

"Company policy has advised me to refrain from such remarks."

Lotto scoffed at that. “If I told you again that my only memory was crashing a spaceship, that wouldn’t make you think it any less.”

“No,” Patch admitted, “it would make me think that you still haven’t recovered; that your mind isn’t healthy enough to be released back into the world. That you still need help.”

“I don’t need help,” he desperately reassured her. He couldn’t remember how many times he’d begged them, tried to assure them there really was nothing wrong with him. So, his memory was lacking — oh, what the hell, completely gone — but that didn’t stop him from *functioning*.

Patch, however, ignored his pleas. Instead she put a small plastic crate onto the table, one that held all of Lotto’s belongings. “I’ve been told you’re allowed these items back. We’ve found nothing dangerous and personnel believe you might remember something if you have a look through. You’re welcome to take these objects back to your room.”

“Will I have to be escorted again?”

“Of course.”

“Then they can carry the crate.” Lotto got up from the table, quickly followed by Patch. “If we’re not making any progress then I might as well head back now, mightn’t I?” Lotto argued, and Patch hadn’t the energy to contradict.

An orderly came in, somebody young enough to be Lotto’s son, and helped lead him back through to his room. In truth, if Lotto had tried to get there himself, he’d never have been able to find it. The lights blazed in monochrome; it would be like wandering in a loop while being promised it’s a maze.

He went over the memories in his head again. Yes, he *had* crashed a vehicle. And it *was* hard to remember what it was. He remembered it being some sort of ship on some days, yet other days it was just a cerulean motor-car.

He couldn't remember his days before the crash; *that* was the problem. His earliest memory was of the collision he'd had with the ground, his vehicle scarring it and himself.

He could never voice this to Patch. He didn't trust her — or, in truth, anybody else in the Happiness Facility. When you feel it pertinent to name your own building after "Happiness", the implication rather lands on the obverse.

The orderly dropped him off at his room — more of a cell, really — and put down his belongings on the bed. Lotto was then abandoned in his head-splittingly white room. He had a bed he refused to actually clean, a desk that he had no reason to use, and a window that gave a lovely view of a city he'd never get to see up close.

The only true souvenir he had of the outside world was the damn limp he had since he woke up. He couldn't think of a day that he hadn't had to go through the corridors either with a limp or a cane, his leg sending a shooting pain up his spine at the slightest pressure. At this point, he struggled to see himself without the crutch under his arm.

Lotto moved the small pile of boxes atop his bed onto the floor, set that crutch by the side of his bed and settled down. Surely it shouldn't be too hard to sleep.

2. The Day After

Lotto didn't sleep. Instead he spent the rest of the night rearranging his few worldly belongings into a moodboard of mystery. It wasn't advised by the orderlies to stay awake all night, but Lotto couldn't help it. He *had* moved the box with the intent to sleep, but the second he saw the dirtied torn up lottery ticket sandwiched into the side of the box, his focus was dragged out.

Old clothes worn by his past self were stapled onto the wall, blue velvet and leather belts galore. Tiny black glasses that he couldn't imagine himself wearing, but which allegedly belonged to him. The remainder of the objects were metal junk — they would've come from whatever vehicle he'd used to make it here, he expected; fragments of a starship, torn out from its engine and stuffed into his pockets. Why, he couldn't fathom.

And in the centre of the board, the torched lottery ticket that looked seconds away from turning to ash altogether. To his eyes, now, the numbers on the sheet were incomprehensible, and the letters looked like the glyphs of a dead language forgotten by the people of Earth; arcane, incomprehensible gibberish. So why? Why should he have carried that ticket across the stars, why should he have taken obvious care to snatch it from the inferno even when his own life had been imperiled? What sense did *that* make? At times Lotto thought he really was crazy, or perhaps — who knew with amnesia? — that he had just forgotten how to read these symbols. And yet, time and and time again, his faculties refocused on that particular mystery. He had a gut instinct that he trusted — this lottery ticket held the key.

The writing on the back helped on this point.

IDEAS / MEMORIES.

In clear English, understandable without any research. Ideas and memories had been rattling around his head for hours as he sat and stared at the board in front of him, the menagerie of objects that he was desperate to decipher. If there was a balance, it was currently out of whack . All he had was ideas, so what was he failing to remember?

Everything, he mused.

The day officially started as a loud bell rang throughout the building, the lottery ticket swiftly stuffed into his pocket. Pretending not to be tired was going to be difficult, but the Happiness Facility was busy enough that he could distract himself. The door locks clicked off — he stepped out of his room, leaving before everyone else could leave their own. Moments later, those other inmates charged out like angry bulls.

He hated when the day started because, suddenly, he was in a madhouse. Characters galore flooded into the corridors with childish excitement, roaring and cheering as they ran around the building like dogs let off their leashes. It was safest for Lotto to stay clinging to the door of his room as dozens in the same situation went all out. He imagined they'd be pulled in by the scruffs of their necks and led to get some food, but the other patients would have to be caught first.

He felt a pressure around his hand and looked to his side.

"How did it go?" Alice asked.

Alice was a younger woman straight out of a fairy tale. She used to have long blonde hair trailing and bright blue eyes, but the life had dulled in her and her hair had been cut down to the scalp. It'd only regrown to her shoulders recently. He squeezed her hand, as if she'd keep him safe.

"It went okay," Lotto admitted as they started the walk, "barely an interview."

"It was rude of them to just drag you out."

"It was rude of them to think I'd have anything else to say."

"Still no memory then?" Alice asked. She was the only person Lotto had felt comfortable properly opening up to. She was the only person that heard him say "spaceship" — occasionally *timeship* — and didn't think he was crazy, like everyone else appeared to be.

"It's the story at least," he told her, "They still don't believe the spaceship stor y."

"It's a cute idea."

"It's the truth," Lotto insisted. "I just don't understand *how* it's the truth yet."

Alice chuckled at that, resting her head on his arm as they walked. Even with the chaos around them, the echoes of rowdy patients and dominating nurses around them, they were blind to the rest of the world. "I came here because of a storybook, so at least we're on equal footing."

"A good storybook," Lotto insisted, "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a lovely book."

"The sequel is better. I would know," she said, "I lived it."

The pair reached the food hall. They were the first there, same as always, as they took their regular seats at a sterile white table. "Weird thing is they gave me my stuff back," Lotto pointed out. That caught Alice's attention, sad blue eyes going wide.

"Really? I still don't have any of my stuff."

"I know, it's strange. But look what I had." He pulled the lottery ticket out and slided it over to her. She read it and frowned. "Ideas, memories? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know yet," he said, "but it clearly mattered if I had to write it down."

"How do you even know it's yours?" Alice responded. Lotto had to admit she had a point — for all he knew this could've been written by somebody else. Someone trying to help? Maybe in that spaceship he had a copilot, or was a prisoner.

But despite his confusion, the patient still remembered his name, and in it lay a clue to all this .

"My name is Lotto. There's 'coincidence' and then there's 'being named after your biggest clue'."

Alice just responded with a shrug, sitting herself back as she allowed the old man his victory. Others were being led in now, prompting Lotto's full attention. There was a specific person worth keeping an eye on that hadn't entered yet, which both calmed and terrified Lotto. His name was Ringo, or he called himself that — in truth, nobody here remembered their names and simply assigned them to each other (Lotto based on his ticket, he now understood, and Alice based on her alleged past in Wonderland). Ringo had earned his title after not only proudly claiming to be *all* of the Beatles, a scientifically difficult feat, but equally attempting to prove it in an astonishing one-man band attempt.

And yet he still wasn't here. It wasn't that which worried Lotto — if anything it was a relief to not have a poor cockney accent barking down his ear. The problem was much greater. In the time that Lotto had been here, people had begun disappearing with chilling regularity. "Rehabilitated" was the official word that the Happiness Facility liked to use, but Lotto knew better than that — he'd have heard something, he would've *seen* something in all his time. Nobody was able to disappear without a word. If there was such a thing as the impossible, that was an example of it.

Of course, the other reason he might be gone was the regular escape attempts.

A hand shot around his shoulder and for a moment Lotto thought he saw his life flash before his eyes — he remembered little so it was pitifully brief — until that voice came around and reassured him.

"Hello mate," came the familiar imitation-cockney tones, "I've got a good plan."

"Is it another paraglider?" Alice jokingly asked, making the young man scowl.

Lotto parted the messy bowl cut on Ringo's hair as the excited man tried to pull something from under his pants. To the relief of everybody else at the table, he simply pulled out a large map. After carefully glancing at the orderlies to make sure they didn't see, he quickly sprawled out across the table.

"You're gonna love this," he promised as he grabbed a pen from the table and started circling parts of the map.

Lotto rolled his eyes, "Kinda missing the part where you explain things, Sergeant Pepper."

"Well I need to write the information down!"

"Why didn't you do it before you came out?"

He gave a look like a dog being told off as he admitted:

"The Orderlies confiscated my pens again. Anyway, look!"

He started tapping gently on the map, careful not to draw attention. He'd circled the main exit.

Alice blinked. "If your plan is to just walk out the front door…" she warned.

"No!" Ringo said, "I'm not that dumb, love. But I've been going about this all wrong! Every other exit I've tried to take is heavily guarded — the corners, the rooftops, the sewers systems…"

"Ew."

"Yeah, I stank for weeks, but still! They're both incredibly smart and incredibly stupid because —"

Lotto finally clicked the excitement as he breathed out:

"They aren't guarding the front?"

"Who's going to walk right out the front door?" Ringo said smugly, spinning the pen in his fingers.

Alice couldn't help but shoot a look between the both of them incredulously.

"You… You can't be serious!" she huffed. "We can't just walk out the front door of this place."

Lotto had to agree, it was a terrible idea, even on top of Ringo's past plans with catapults and secret tunnels.

Ringo waved his hands dismissively before beckoning his friends in closer. "We —"

"You," Lotto whispered back.

"Fine," Ringo huffed, "*I* am going to stage a riot."

"What? You're crazy," Alice said.

"So is everyone else here… Damn it, I shouldn't be encouraging this stuff, but a riot probably wouldn't be too hard to start in this place." Lotto couldn't look Ringo in the eye; he didn't need the grin of four British musicians fused together, all glaring back at him.

"I'm telling you, I promise you, I can make this happen. All it takes is the right day, getting them when they're understaffed. If they don't have enough people to stop us all then we can push through, overpower, probably even get a few weapons for ourselves. I'm telling you, if we get this right it's Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road."

"That's Elton John," Lotto corrected.

Ringo shrugged nonchalantly. "It's fine, I'm right eight other days of the week."

"How long do you think weeks *are*?"

"Shut up! Come on, you guys know this will work!"

Lotto was unsure. He didn't want to encourage a situation that was inherently dangerous and he knew that Ringo was dangerously close to "rehabilitation" if he wasn't willing to fix his behaviour and get his head on straight. That wasn't something he wanted to be on his hands. It was lucky, in one case, that Alice was more willing to indulge Ringo.

"Alright, then. What do we need to do?"

3. The Process of Rehabilitation

A few days' worth of work was all that the trio needed, even without Lotto's direct help. Alice and Ringo were younger, had more energy — enough to make up for his unavailability. Between their enthusiasm and the speed that word can spread, the seeds of rebellion were easily sown beneath the notice of the Happiness staff.

All the while, Lotto had his own mission. He couldn't trust that this plan would work; how could he? Walking out the front door still seemed deranged from every perspective he could manage.

And that was the reason for his plans for distractions, sabotage and anything else that'd delay the inevitable. It was this plan that had him sneaking through the corridors of the building through a lunch break. When everybody else was encouraged to take to more leisurely activities, Lotto skulked through doorways and ducked out of the sight of cameras. He knew the layout quite intimately thanks to six months locked up, but the cameras were the most difficult thing to dodge. Lotto knew that, during the escape, he had to blend into the crowd. If he could do that, he'd be able to disable the cameras.

Lotto quickly realised it was harder than he'd thought it would be to dodge the sight of orderlies milling through the corridors — he forced himself to duck into a janitor's closet.

The panic set in fast, but he steadied himself quickly. Any commotion was going to be a giveaway and he couldn't be caught, even now. The risk of "rehabilitation" still hung over his head; a looming shadow he could *feel* in his heart was hiding something. He dared not exit the closet, but the chattering behind the door was almost too tempting. What was that twinging in the back of his head? He dared not call it curiosity, lest he face the cat's fate.

Fear couldn't stop him slightly opening the door, just a crack.

He could see Patch wandering the halls with… someone new. Well-kept, slender, it was like seeing a fashionable skeleton! He wore a black suit with

deep blue pinstripes, and his hair only had the most subtle of a grey streak across it.

"Mr Mosaic," Patch addressed him, "I can assure you that we've never been more profitable than we've been now. Getting the patients adjusted to the situation hasn't been difficult, bar for a handful…"

"Yes, I've heard of these… exceptions," he pointed out. "Your spaceman, your one-man Beatles. I don't see how they can't find their place with the Company! One is an obvious example of a musician waiting in the wings, and who doesn't love to see a Neil Armstrong type? They'd certainly be the most popular around the park."

The park? Lotto had never heard of such a place from the staff, it must've been where people were sent after the Facility.

"Be that as it may," Patch informed, "There are other people that are better suited for rehabilitation. For example…"

But Lotto had stopped listening as another person passed by the doorway. He recognized them immediately. It was nobody he had a proper relationship with — they hadn't even shared a conversation in the time that Martin had been at the Happiness Facility — but to see him suddenly wearing a nicely tailored suit and a wire around his ear was certainly more than a shock. Martin had been there when Lotto first arrived, another mad patient who ran around with the belief he was an Olympian — not an athlete, but a Greek god. He had been rehabilitated early into Lotto's stay.

Lotto's feet were moving before he was even thinking.

He moved fast when Mosaic and Patch turned around, hiding behind Martin – not hard for somebody so large — and spoke. "Martin? Martin, do you remember me?"

No response.

"What are you doing here? Come on, speak to me?"

No response. One foot in front of the other.

"Come on, Martin, talk to me. You shouldn't be back here," Lotto quietly argued, "you should be out living your life properly! What are you doing?"

The lack of response was starting to infuriate Lotto. But he needed to see if there was anything left in Martin's head.

"What is rehabilitation?" he outright asked, knowing the answer he'd get. This time, however, he did see a twitch from Martin as he was finally getting through to him. "Good, yes, you remember that, don't you? You remember being rehabilitated? Whatever that means… look at you, an Olympian turned into someone's guard dog." That got a reaction, Martin's fist clenching.

"I know you can hear me," Lotto said, "I'm trying to help you. Just tell me what's going on. What does this Mosaic guy want? What has he…" He stopped for a moment as he finally got a look at Martin's fist — his muscles were changing colour, growing darker, like iron. "Martin… what did they do to you…" Lotto asked softly.

He only wanted to touch gently, to get a feel of what was happening. Maybe it was some form of muscle deterioration. He was made it patently aware that this wasn't the case when Martin turned and punched him straight across the jaw. He was shocked it had remained attached, feeling like a train had just barreled through the corridor and hit him square. Lotto was off his feet immediately, but then Martin was on top of him. Again and again, punch after punch — he was barely holding onto consciousness when Mosaic noticed. "Martin, that's enough! Get off the poor man!" He yelled. Martin stopped, dragged away by his Master.

Mosaic turned to Patch with a scowl, "Madam, I demand an explanation!"

"I— I don't know," she stuttered out, "all the patients are supposed to be outside."

"And yet instead, one of them is here and harassing my man!"

"Excuse me? Lotto didn't —"

Mosaic shushed Patch swiftly. "You forget, ma*dam*, Martin has had a full rehabilitation. He's a fully functioning member of society again, do you really think he'd attack such a man unprovoked? Without reason??"

"No sir," Patch admitted, against her better judgement.

"Precisely…"

Lotto wasn't aware of where else the conversation went.

He could figure it out when he woke up in an empty room.

No desk, no window, only a bed to keep him company. This must've been solitar y.

Lotto could barely bring himself to stand, just moving sent pain through every corner of his body. He could barely bring himself to sit up in bed, but at least it would've proven to anybody watching him that he hadn't been beaten to death. Within an inch of his life, perhaps, but not outright dead.

It was strange. He felt so very powerless and empty, so shocked to be locked in an empty room, and yet there was a fire in his chest. There was a burst of energy being stamped out and held back, as if it wasn't ready.

A knock on the door nearly started that energy out of him, but he held it in.

"Lotto?" Alice called. "Can you hear me?"

He couldn't muster a word. *Great*, he thought, *now I feel rude*.

Alice continued, "I heard what happened. I'm really sorry, but you shouldn't have attacked some guy like that!"

Of course she'd been told that story. It wasn't even close to what happened. Probably better to cover it up for the "safety" of this stupid hospital.

"I just wanted you to know the plan is going well, but you'll need to continue without me. Ringo will tell you everything, but I need to start packing."

Packing? That made no sense, nobody left unless —

Alice suddenly heard a slam from the other side of the door, as Lotto seemed ready to bring it off the hinges.

"Don't pack!" he cried in panic. "You can't go!"

"Why not?" she asked, "rehabilitation means that I'll be back in the real world. I'll actually get to be myself again."

"No you won't! Something's happening, Alice, I don't know what yet, but please!"

"You're starting to sound like Ringo, coming up with mad theories."

"Well maybe Ringo is right!" Lotto argued back. "Listen, tell me… when do you go?"

"My exit date? Um…" It took her a painful amount of seconds to remember, which felt like years passing inside of the cell. "A couple of days? I really do need to pack up and get ready."

"Tell Ringo something for me," Lotto pleaded. "Please, Alice."

"Okay,what?"

"Tell him we break out tomorrow. We're getting *everybody* out."

4. The Big Day

Lotto felt blinded, the four walls choking him as he waited.

There was nothing to look at except white paint. Nowhere comfortable to sit save a crappy mattress.

Yet all Lotto chose to do was sit and wait. It was a matter of time now, he had come to realise.

He wasn't sure what'd be the giveaway once it finally began, but any second now there'd be exactly what he was waiting for. Any sign, any signal and he'd be ready.

As soon as the door was unlocked.

Of course, that was going to be trickier and Lotto hadn't really thought of a plan there. He just had to hope Alice unlocked him or, somehow, that Ringo managed to remember to unlock the door. That wasn't impossible, but quite unlikely.

Suddenly, a blaring sound. The only signal that Lotto needed. The sound of orderlies rushing by the door in panic certainly brought a smile to Lotto's face. He didn't hear the full details, but there were some unique snippets — he heard accusations of "wild gorilla-like behaviour", and saw many patients dragged to the sides, screaming. He worried for them, but steadfastly hoped — not quite *believed*, but hoped, certainly — that the breakout would be successful.

Finally he started pounding on the door, hoping someone — anyone — would have some sense to get him out. They *could* all leave without him, he soberingly understood, but decided he'd rather not humour the thought — and he didn't *really* believe it, anyway,

"Come on, let me out! Ringo, Alice!" he called out, "Anybody!"

His lungs hurt from screaming, fists throbbing in pain as he kept punching the door. He only stopped when he finally heard the key enter the lock,

letting out a sigh of relief. He would've been fine just tackling whoever let him out to escape, but the sight of Ringo stopped him.

"There you are!" he called with a chipper smile, although Lotto stared at him in confusion.

"Where's your shirt?"

"Lost it, stole a doctor's jacket; I look good!"

"Sure. Where's Alice?"

Ringo gave a shrug, as Lotto finally stepped out. "That's not an answer, Ringo," Lotto warned carefully.

"Well, I don't know!" Ringo admitted, "We lost track of each other after the riot began. You should've seen her, man, she threw this chair so hard that —"

Lotto swiftly shut Ringo up by covering the young man's mouth, staring daggers into him. "Riot?" He demanded, appearing slightly furious, although his true concern for Alice was not hidden.

"Yeah…" Ringo gave an awkward laugh, "I figured this'd be more organised than it ended up being… But hey, we're getting out, right?"

Lotto backed away for a moment to catch his thoughts. He needed to simply focus, to just *think*.

Alice is somewhere in the building and there's a riot.

If she had been able, she would have unlocked his door, so she must've been stopped by something. Another patient was possible, but Lotto considered it unlikely — the girl knew how to navigate around her fellows here.

"She's set for rehabilitation," Lotto realised in a whisper, a sense of dread invading his mind.

As soon as the thought finished forming, he sprinted down the corridor; no time for goodbyes with Ringo, he had to help her. If he didn't, she'd be lost.

Lotto ran to every inch of the building that came to mind, whether it made sense or not, just to see if Alice had somehow escaped.

He checked the boiler room to find patients butchering the machines.

He checked the corridor where her room was, but she wasn't hidden there and the bed had been torn apart.

Even his own room had been torn to shreds, his only worldly possessions gone. All except for the lottery ticket — quickly slipped into his shirt pocket. Still, Lotto scoured the landscape, charging through dining halls and seeing a shocking amount of guards pinned down or knocked out cold — what had *happened* here?

Every turn, she wasn't there.

Every corridor, he grew more and more fearful.

He didn't know what was happening, who Mr Mosaic was, but he didn't *have* to know the details — they were dangerous, something was happening and he wasn't going to let her get caught in it, she wasn't going to get hurt!

Lotto barely had the time to realise just how much he cared before he dovetailed through a closing door and finally caught a sound. It was faint over the chaos but he could make it out — Patch's voice.

"I'm working on it!" she yelled at someone wholly unheard — she must be speaking into a walkie-talkie. "It's difficult when the whole facility is collapsing in on itself! It'll take some time but we'll at least get this girl to you tonight, sir."

Patch was barely even focused on what Mosaic was saying back to her.

She stood at the back of a van with her head in her hands.

Her jacket had been stolen, her honour disgraced, her men beaten up in the corridors — now they flooded onto the streets!

Yet all she worried about was how this'd reflect on her career. Still, she thought, at least two of the orderlies were in working condition to help move the patient. Alice was quiet as she was moved, almost looking like she was praying, which Patch found almost laughable. It would've been funnier if the Happiness Facility wasn't going to hell around her.

"Sir, she'll be with you in a couple of hours, I promise," she reassured Mosaic before having the radio hung up on her. It wasn't just rude, it made it feel like she didn't even exist for a moment. "You're lucky, Alice," Patch admitted, "Someone actually wants you around."

"I don't feel lucky, ma'am," Alice huffed.

"Oh, you'll be fine, I promise," Patch reassured as she moved over to the young girl. "A lot of people entered the rehabilitation program this year and not a single one has failed. That's a good thing! You're going back to your normal life."

"You know something is wrong here," Alice argued back. "Why are you ignoring it? You could stop it from happening!"
"Nothing is happening," Patch reassured her.

"But —"

"Alice." Patch was glaring now, and the glare was no less foreboding for being halved. A single eye just meant a single dagger.

Patch wasn't in the mood to try and calm anybody down.

Alice barely even managed to start a word before she was slapped across the face by Patch, who then pushed her roughly towards the orderlies.

"Put her in the van," she ordered.

Click.

"Let her go."

The orderlies froze as Patch's spine straightened.

All the while, Lotto's hand was shaking like a damn earthquake. He hadn't even let his brain catch up with his actions once he arrived in the parking lot. When Patch had slapped Alice, he had slipped the gun out of its holster in the blink of an eye and *now*… now, there was no going back.

"Lotto," Alice said in relief.

"You're going to be fine," Lotto reassured, then made his voice louder as he glanced at Patch, "because *they*'re going to let you go. Now. Or I pull this trig ger."

"Gentlemen, ignore him," Patch ordered. "He won't shoot."

"I will!"

"You won't. You're British — I'd be shocked if you even know how to—"

The thunderous gunshot proved that, yes, Lotto knew how to fire a gun. The single shot was enough to suddenly provide a lot of time for everyone.

First of all, to Lotto's relief, he missed Patch — shaking far too much, he fired right next to her head. A death on his hands wasn't something he could stomach, but deafness… his conscience would recover. Alice screamed as the orderlies fell, both thinking they'd been hit like a veritable tweedle-dum and dee, before she quickly ran over to Lotto's arms.

She grabbed him and ran. The gun was dropped the second she was close as they charged back into the Facility. "There are still so many people!" Alice said. "What do we do?"

"Alice," Lotto asked. "Do you trust me?"

"You just saved my life, of course I do."

"Good. We're going to help everybody get out the front door."

"How are we going to do that?"

"Going? I just shot their head of security and kidnapped you! I already have *done* it. Sorry, Alice, but we're the bait."

5. The Rooftop

The two kept running; it was the only option they had left.

Lotto was forcing Alice ahead only so that he could shield her from danger. She was struggling to see clearly through the tears, the panic blinding her. She had no other option. Neither of them had the luxury to wait. The other patients were still escaping — they were far too great in number for the orderlies to hold them back. Suddenly, those dominant, even invincible security people who'd had them in their grasp for so long found themselves as paper — outnumbered — shoved aside without fear or hesitation as the madding crowd overwhelmed them.

Lotto only stopped for a moment on the stairs to gaze out the window. That beautiful city, he thought to himself, was so close now. On the pavement outside, he could see Ringo finally leading his army of disorderlies into the streets. With hoots, hollers and cheers galore, dozens and dozens of the patients scattered and ran. Lotto smiled.

"Come on!" Alice yelled, grabbing Lotto as a gunshot rang through the stairwell. No time to stop, Alice was right. The pair kept running — not down towards the escape, but up like proper bait. It was a poor plan but Lotto insisted; if they went downstairs now then it would all be for naught.

In the end, all that mattered was getting Alice out of here safely.

The roof was bare and the door was weak, so kicking it open wasn't difficult for the young woman. As Alice charged in on the hunt for clues, Lotto limped forward. His crutch was slotted against the door, keeping it 'locked' for now. Alice was hyperventilating, holding her chest as she looked around. "What do we do?" She sputtered out desperately.

Lotto took her hand and smiled reassuringly. "Alice," he softly told her, "it's not going to get better. I need you to trust me."

"But —"

"No, I mean it. I'm getting you out of here, but you're on your own after that." Lotto looked back at the door. Already, someone was trying to break

through. He could recognize Patch's voice through the metal. "Hide," he told her, "then run down when they don't see you. I'll distract them."

"Lotto, I *can't*," she begged.

He held her hands tightly, close to his chest. "Yes you can," he promised. "You're going to go home, Alice. I promise." There was little more time to argue. He pushed her to run behind the door and hide, just in time.

With a loud thud, the crutch was knocked to the ground and Patch emerged from the doorway. Defensively, Lotto limped backwards, closer to the edge of the rooftop. Patch should've been more aware — she was the damn head of security and she'd let this happen on her watch!? Lotto knew how much angrier she'd be once she'd settled into the situation. For now, that anger was his tool.

Focus on Patch, he told himself. If he didn't, if he even slightly looked to Alice as she snuck behind Patch, then he risked giving her away.

Focus on the guard.

Focus on the gun.

It shined against the sunlight, pointed at Lotto. "That's awfully careless," he said, feigning confidence in the light of his own terror.

"Lotto," Patch stated. Her voice carried a sombre dominance as if she could raise the dead in a single word. "This has gone too far," she told him, "you have no idea what you've done."

"No, I'm well aware."

"No, I don't think you are!" She yelled back. The safety on the gun clicked off. "These patients are unwell. They're dangers to the people around and themselves," she told him, "and you've just let them onto the streets without a care in the world."

Lotto gritted his teeth, trying to ignore the movement of Alice behind the madwoman. He scowled at the security guard, "I did what I had to do. These

people were not dangers to anyone, not by their own design." He took a step back. "You don't even realise what's going on here."

"Then tell me," Patch pleaded. "Try and make me understand because from where I'm standing? People are going to get hurt."

"Including people like me?" He asked. The two stared each other down for uncomfortable lingering seconds, until Patch finally realised what he meant. She lowered the gun. She didn't notice the door slowly closing behind her.

Patch took a step closer to Lotto. He took another step to the ledge.

"I don't think you're a bad person," Lotto told her. "I think you're in a bad situation."

"I don't think you're in a position to say that," she responded, unable to meet his gaze.

"I can help you. I can help all of them, but you need to trust me."

Her head shot back up at that, as she swiftly told him "No. I'm not falling for that, Lotto. You think I'm going to let a patient all of a sudden run things around here?"

"Better me than a… a *slavemaster*!" Lotto shot back. Patch could barely get a response out as Lotto shouted "Mr Mosaic is not helping anybody but himself! The people here are not being rehabilitated, or cured! They're being turned into dolls for the Company!"

He hadn't felt this passion for so long, the fire burning in his chest spreading through every fibre of his being. He scoffed at her expression.

"Do you even realise who the Company are? I'm clueless, sure, but I've been locked in here for months, meanwhile you've been licking the boot like an obedient *dog* for *years*!" A shot of saliva raced out of Lotto's mouth and made contact with Patch.

The gun raised swiftly back at Lotto, as if in response. *That is good*, Lotto thought. He didn't care about being shot — he was confident that Alice had enough time. The rest of the guards were too distracted. He had faith.

Patch focused, hand shaking in anger. "You do not understand," she told him slowly. "They want to help you."

"They want to *own* us."

Lotto took another step back to the edge. Nowhere else to go now. His heels bumped into the brickwork of the edge.

Only one other way to go now. No getting back through the door.

No getting past the gun.

"Lotto," Patch said. He didn't hear the rest. He wasn't paying attention to it. As she spoke, his hand slowly moved to his breast pocket — Lotto rationalised that she would've fired if it was any other place, but what weapon could he hide there? He only reached in for one thing and read it back to himself.

"Ideas and memories…"

"Excuse me?"

He crumpled the lottery ticket in his hand. "Do you know the difference between ideas and memories? Probably not. You're just one person, you've lived one life, you've probably got a family back home."

"So do you," she said sympathetically. A mask, Lotto could tell, and not one she was successfully wearing. "Think about them, Lotto, what they would want for you."

"Ah, but that's the thing," Lotto said with a smile. "I don't know what they would want. I don't have a memory of it, but I have an idea." That smile was growing wider by the second, a pure Cheshire Cat smile as he saw it, at last. Over the edge of the rooftop, he could see Alice finally making it out. The blonde hair bouncing in the wind as she ran into Ringo's arms. Hand-in-hand, his only two friends in the world escaped.

The only family he knew, safe at last.

Lotto stared down Patch. "I think it's clearing up now," he admitted to her.

"What is?" she asked. "Are you remembering who you are, Lotto?"

He stayed silent. It was more complicated than she would ever really understand. "The thing is… memories and ideas are very different things," he told her. "Memories are rigid, set structures, the building blocks of history. But ideas? They're more fluid."

"You're not making sense."

"Few ideas do!" he laughed, a sense of joy overwhelming him.

Patch watched Lotto step up onto the very edge of the roof and, finally, panic set in. It finally dawned on her what was happening — oh God, what *she* was letting happen!

"Lotto," she said with a sudden, genuine panic to her voice, "Step down from there."

"I remember crashing that ship," he told her confidently. "I remember where I came from. You were right, Patch, I'm not an alien. But I'm not a human anymore."

"Right, I believe you," she lied, trying her best just to convince him to step down. She wasn't even aiming the gun properly anymore, hands shaking. Patch hadn't felt this since her first year as a security guard. "Just… step down."

"I would. But we both know how that'd go,"

He could see it in front of him, like a spider's web.

"I step down, you lead me back, I try to escape. Outcome — I get shot and I die. Option two — I jump! You'll fire by accident and hit me on the way down. I'll die, but I'll have a *little more time*."

Patch shook her head. "You're talking crazy," she told him. "This is what we want to help you all with, Lotto. Just step down. Let us help you."

For one blissful second, it dawned on Lotto just how crazy he was sounding. The truth of the matter is he wasn't sure which idea he believed in

more. He knew that there was something greater to his past and he had to find out what. He knew that right now he stood on a branch. Step down and choose humanity. Jump and become something more; find out the truth.

He clutched the lottery ticket in his hand with ferocity. Lotto's choice was made.

One step.

He didn't hear Patch's pleading over the following gunshot.

Patch didn't see him land or hear the crunch of bone.

She didn't hear the bone snap back into place.

Lotto was gone from Patch's life forevermore.

6. Farewell Alice

"Y'know," Ringo said as he dragged Lotto along the ground, "I've never seen anybody take a fall like that before and walk it off!"

"He's hardly walking, is he?" Alice growled. She wasn't angry, but if she had been, Lotto wouldn't've blamed her — this was a stupid decision, but, realistically, it was also the only choice he had left. "Why did she shoot you?"

"Because I told her to," Lotto said. "She thought she didn't have a choice. She's just another cog in the wheel, nothing more."

He was breathing slowly, looking down. *Lord*, that was a lot of blood! Too much for one person; he was aware of that intimately. A few belts wrapped around his waist to stop the bleeding, but they were doing little. The reality of the situation was settling in.

The trio ducked into an alleyway, alone together. The other patients had scattered and with a full festival going on, the Company and the Happiness Facility would never be able to catch them. That just left the trio to escape. Lotto pushed himself away from Ringo and landed against a dumpster, the smell repugnant but intoxicating — how he had missed the outside world.

"Right, alright, alright…" Ringo looked out the alley and smirked excitedly. There was a whole carnival passing through the street, people filling every step of the pavement. All it'd take is a few more steps and they'd be home free. "I think if we just hold hands and play it normal," he told them, "we'll be fine. Lotto can get stitched up and we're on our way back into the world."

Alice wasn't listening. She was crouched down by Lotto's side as he slumped against the wall. She put as much pressure on the gunshot wound but he shook his head, this just wasn't going to be enough.

"Alice, come on!" Ringo said, before daggers were glared into his soul.

"I'm not leaving without him!" she yelled back.

They were lucky the carnival was loud enough to drown them out.

“Alice…” Lotto groaned, trying to stay conscious. “You both have to go.”

“No,” she said, “not without you. I am not leaving you here to die.”

“I won’t get help fast enough. I’m sorry.”

Ringo moved down by Alice’s side, holding her shoulders. He was using all of his strength not to drag Alice away, knowing it’d only make things worse. There was barely any time to stay calm.

“Any second now…” he mumbled.

Alice held back tears, holding onto Lotto’s hand tightly. “Just a few more minutes,” she begged. “We can make a few more minutes, can’t we?”

All Lotto did was shake his head. He had to ignore her, the pain was already unbearable.

“Ringo,” he demanded, “you look after her.”

“Me?” he said, bewildered.

“Yes.”

Even when dying, Lotto knew how to cheat — how could Ringo deny a dying man’s last wish? Ringo nodded in silent agreement as Lotto smiled. Not much strength now, he realised. At least the pain would be over soon. He used all the strength he had left to take Alice’s hand and wrap it in his patient gown, rubbing the blood off on his chest.

“Go,” he weakly begged. “Live your life… I’ll find you again…”

He didn’t have the strength to say everything he wanted to. Alice didn’t have the strength to let him go. Ringo had to be the one holding Alice, encouraging her to her feet. Lotto didn’t hear Alice weep out a “Thank you”, or feel her hand wrap around and hug his head tightly for only a moment. The most he could make out as his head slumped back against the brick wall was the blur of two patients, an older man and young girl, disappearing into the crowd of colours.

That was okay, he thought. They left, that was good, they'd both be safe… Alice would be safe. A smile curled at his lips as he finally felt it. How long had it been since he'd had a good sleep? He expected to be scared when his death came, but he welcomed it.

The pain dulled. His vision narrowed and darkened…

And then, suddenly, it cleared.

He could still barely move, taking long strained breaths, but now… Who were these people? He could barely make them out, they looked like shadows or snowmen, like people seen out of the corner of your eye. No words could escape his mouth as he struggled to comprehend what he was witnessing.

One of these visions moved to stand in front of him. She crouched and cupped the man's face in her hands.

Lotto felt cold.

Then Lotto felt nothing.

And then she woke up.

7. The Change

Patch must've spent the last twelve hours scouring the nearby towns on foot. No matter where she went, where she dispatched orderlies and security guards, not a single patient could be found. Already the scenarios were running through her head. Some of them might put people in danger, which at least would make it easier to track them down. Then there were the patients who were greater risks to themselves more than anything else; that was a concern. But the biggest problem, the one sticking in her head, was the patient she'd shot.

There was a trail of blood. Patch knew that Lotto wouldn't have survived a shot like that, nobody *could* have. Her priority was to find his body — the last thing that the Company needed was a corpse being caught by anyone. Sure, the parade offered a useful smokescreen, but that wasn't enough to cover up a death. Even an idiot could figure that one out.

She followed that trail for every step, twist and turn it took her on. She was lucky the trail was short, but it wasn't how Patch saw things. It just meant, as the trail of blood thinned, the chances of a body were rapidly skyrocketing. When the blood stopped by a dumpster, for a moment, she was relieved — nowhere else to run. The best-worst case scenario was that Lotto's body had been ditched in the dumpster by some of the more deranged patients, an option she was willing to bargain for. But the slim chances that Lotto had survived meant she had to ask.

"Anyone in there?" she asked, feeling like an idiot.

As the dumpster suddenly rocked from the inside, the gun rocketed into Patch's hand and pointed straight at the dumpster. "Hands in the air!" she demanded. "Get out of the dumpster!"

Hands shot out as she asked, covered in rubbish.

"Get up. Slowly."

That second instruction was totally ignored. The young woman's head shot out of the top of the dumpster like a raccoon caught in a trap. The Davy Crockett-esque hat she wore upon her head might've even convinced Patch

she *was* a raccoon, for a moment, if it hadn't been for its purple hues and the smiling face of the Cheshire Cat stuck on the front. As for the human face beneath it, which stood revealed as the dumpster's occupant stood straighter —

Patch had never seen the woman before in her life.

She was paler than snow and with freckles galore. Her ginger hair looked clean, from what little could be seen beneath the hat, but it was disheveled, disorderly locks spiralling down on her face. Only the black-rimmed glasses framing the emerald eyes looked familiar, but in the moment, with stress making the vein on her forehead bulge, Patch couldn't place where she recognised them from.

"Sorry!" the young woman said with youthful excitement. "Saw a dumpster, couldn't resist."

"Excuse me?"

"People say that one man's trash is another man's treasure, so I figured — what the hell?!"

She was *still* smiling, Patch noted. That woman smiled like her life depended on it. It was the first time positivity had successfully made her uncomfor table.

"Right…" She hummed nervously, shaking her head.

Patch approached the younger woman with a huff, and spoke again with greater confidence.

"Have you seen any people in hospital gowns running through this area, ma'am?"

"Can't say I have, but I've seen all sorts! Think there was one of those big blimps on the street earlier, but it's hard to see from the trash," the ginger confessed freely.

Patch glared. "Have you been drinking, ma'am?"

"Don't think so, although…" The woman shot back into the trash and rocketed back up with an empty bottle, "This probably wouldn't make me look good, would it?"

Patch held back outright screaming at the woman for wasting her time, instead making the sensible choice to holster her firearm.

"Stay out of trouble," she instructed, "and stay out of dumpsters or else I'll give you a public warning, Miss…?"

"Demeanour," the ginger responded. "That's called a misdemeanour!"

She practically dove in like she was making snow angels, a good enough sign to Patch that their conversation was over. With enough rage to have steam blow out her ears, she stormed off on her mission. She'd have to find Lotto eventually. Lotto, or someone else. God, *any* of the patients, just *one*! She couldn't have screwed things up *this* badly!

The young lady waited only a few seconds for Patch to be properly gone before she poked her head out the dumpster.

"Well then!" she said to herself, "She seems grouchier than usual!"

The ginger finally hopped out of the dumpster and brushed the rubbish off, throwing some of it back as she spun around. Her patient gown was so much baggier; she had shrunk by a foot.

"Now, that *is* curious…" she told herself, looking back into the dumpster. She needed to cover up the bloody clothes until she could get better ones — luckily, people threw out perfectly good stuff all the time. So there was a mucky jacket with holes in it — *that* was a treasure if she'd ever seen one!

She took a moment to fasten up the jacket's waist and adjust her pretty new hat before her hands moved onto her face. Her *new* face. That was going to take some getting used to. Sure, he — she? Was getting an idea of what was happening, but the memory hadn't resurfaced yet. A new round face, about twenty less years and much better eyesight. It scared her for a moment, but she got over it quickly — she *had* to get over it.

The old man was still somewhere in the back of her head, but he was fading fast. She was going to miss him, but there'd be time to mourn him later.

Right now, there was a conspiracy — her friends were in danger, her past was lost and somebody out there was going to have to find the answers while stopping the madness.

Lotto straightened her hat. She was born for this.